







National Park Service photograph

**Figure 2:** Archeological survey crew members traveling by jet boat on the Mulchatna River in May 2002. Left to right: Matt O'Leary of the BIA-ANCSA office, George Alexie of the Nondalton Tribal Council, and Alan Boraas of Kenai Peninsula College.



Photo courtesy of Dave McMahan

**Figure 3:** Bill Trefon, Sr., president of the Nondalton Tribal Council, holds a mid-nineteenth century Russian copper tea kettle at a Dena'ina Mulchatna village in May 2000.

**Left: Figure 5:** Red and Gladys Vail with their daughter-in-law, Marie Andrews at the Vail camp in 1933-1934 on the Mulchatna River. This cabin has collapsed and was documented by the survey crew.

Photo courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. William Andrews

## Little Known Mulchatna Villages Emerging After 120 Years of Solitude

by John Branson

— *historian for Lake Clark National Park and Preserve, Port Alsworth, Alaska*

During the past two years a multi-agency archeology crew has conducted the first archeological survey on the middle part of the Mulchatna River in southwestern Alaska (Fig. 1). Led by a state archeologist, Dave McMahan, and National Park Service historian John Branson, the crew has located the outlines of 17 Dena'ina Athapaskan house sites in the Mulchatna River valley. Most of the Dena'ina houses were large, multifamily, semi-subterranean dwellings with one to five rooms, which are now heavily vegetated and difficult to discern. In addition to McMahan and Branson, the crew included representatives from Nondalton Tribal Council (Bill Trefon, Sr. and George Alexie), and Bureau of Indian Affairs ANCSA Office (Matt O'Leary) (Figs. 2, 3). Participating agencies and organizations included the Lake and Peninsula Borough, Nondalton Tribal Council, the Kijik Corporation, and the National Park Service, with local logistical support donated by Northern Wilderness

Adventures, Inc.

The Mulchatna River is a 160 mile-long river that begins at Turquoise Lake, with its upper portion designated a Wild and Scenic River. It is the major tributary of the Nushagak River, which drains into Bristol Bay near Dillingham. The Mulchatna country has long been rich in fish and game and in the days before Russian contact those abundant resources sustained the Dena'ina on its upper reaches and Yup'ik Eskimos on its lower stretches. Russian explorers probably visited by the 1790s but documentation of their activities is sparse. Certainly during the Russian era, the Mulchatna Dena'ina had access to Russian trade goods. By 1850 Russian Orthodox priests were in the area, and by the late 1880s, prospectors had arrived in the Mulchatna country (Fig. 4). Today, the Mulchatna River draws thousands of people each year: subsistence fishermen, hunters, and trappers on the lower river; sport hunters, fishermen, and floaters on the upper and middle parts.

It is known that the villages on the Mulchatna were abandoned by the late 1880s after a scarlet fever epidemic deci-

mated much of the local Dena'ina population. Earlier epidemics during the Russian era had probably already thinned the local population from an estimated 400 in 1800 to 180 in 1880 (Petroff claimed 180 people lived in the "Mulchatna villages" in 1880). By the end of the decade, permanent settlements probably ceased to be occupied except on trapping and hunting trips. Most of the people who survived the scarlet fever epidemic relocated to historic Kijik village on Lake Clark.

The survivors were urged to move to Kijik by the Russian Orthodox priest from Nushagak in order to attend the newly built Holy Cross Church. In addition, the trading posts at present-day Iliamna were much more accessible from Kijik than from the more remote Mulchatna. The growing commercial salmon industry on Bristol Bay offered employment opportunities for the Kijik people; however, the commercial fishery was a double-edged sword. Commercial salmon traps near the mouth of the Nushagak reduced escapement to the Mulchatna River spawning grounds, thus diminishing the primary food source of the Dena'ina and making their subsis-



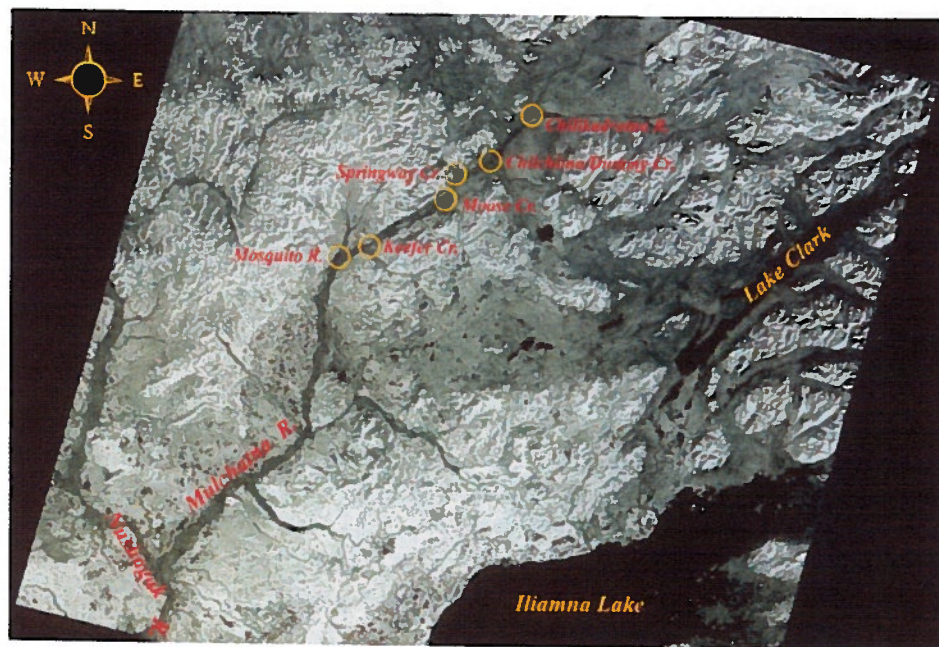


Figure 1: Landsat map of the Lake Clark-Iliamna region of southwestern Alaska. The portion of the Mulchatna River being surveyed for archaeological resources is shown.

Photo courtesy of Dave McMahan



Photo courtesy of Marie Millett

Figure 4: Dena'ina men acted as guides and packers for early twentieth century prospectors in the Mulchatna River valley. In this 1908-1909 photograph from Bonanza Creek, miners (the Milletts) and Dena'ina men are shown together. Standing from left to right are O.B. Millett, Gerasim Balluta, Hugh Millett, Marka Karshehoff, Trefon Balluta, and Yacko Evan. Sitting are Theresa Millett and two unidentified mining engineers.

tence lifeways more tenuous. In short, as the 19th century closed and the 20th century dawned, the Mulchatna villages were too isolated and resource poor to sustain large populations.

The Mulchatna River, from where the Mosquito River enters up to its head at Turquoise Lake, is the ancestral homeland for many people from Nondalton, a Dena'ina Athapaskan village of about 250 people located near the outlet of Lake Clark. Many of those living in Nondalton trace their families to Kijik, and to the villages along the Mulchatna (Fig. 5). The Mulchatna has always had special significance to the people of Nondalton. In fact, a priority to protect cultural sites from inappropriate development has partially guided land selections made by the Lake and Peninsula Borough along the Mulchatna.

Oral histories compiled from Nondalton elders describe at least three historic Dena'ina villages near confluences of major tributaries of the Mulchatna River. During the survey, archeologists located the rectangular outlines of Dena'ina houses near some of the reported sites. In addition, they found several others whose existence was beyond living memory. McMahan believes some of the sites might be one or more of Petroff's 19th century "Mulchatna villages", while others may be as much as several hundred years old.

Another part of the project is to locate and document early 20th century prospector-trapper cabins and camps in the study area. Interviews and historic photographs are being collected from some of those who once lived on the Mulchatna. During the 1920s through the 1940s a number of

Dillingham based trappers built cabins and trapped animals along the survey area. In fact, two trappers in the 1940s located ruins of three large multi-family houses. At the time, they thought Russians had built the houses, which is why they called the area "Russian Slough". Many older people in Dillingham still use the term to describe that channel of the Mulchatna River; however, no one in Nondalton had knowledge about a Dena'ina village along the Mulchatna called "Russian Slough". When the archeology crew located the same three houses, they recognized the classic Dena'ina multifamily style. "Russian Slough" should more properly be called "Dena'ina Slough" (Fig. 6).

The late archeologist, James VanStone, from the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago conducted the first surveys on the lower Mulchatna River in the 1960s. This last spring Choggiung Ltd., the Native village corporation of Dillingham, used a grant from the National Park Service to survey the lower Mulchatna and Nushagak rivers for archeological resources. In the late 1970s the National Park Service conducted a brief archeological survey near the source of the Mulchatna River at Turquoise Lake. But it was not until May 2000, when the present joint effort began, that any intensive archeological survey was undertaken on the resource-rich middle portions of the river. In short, the middle Mulchatna River was terra incognita for archeologists until May 2000. After two years of archeological fieldwork a glimpse into the cultural history of the Mulchatna River is beginning to emerge.

In 2001 McMahan was back on the



Mulchatna to extract charcoal for radiocarbon dating from the hearths of a few Dena'ina house sites. Through radiocarbon dating and careful excavation of test pits, the crew hopes to date Athapaskan occupancy on the river. Based on similar work already done at the Kijik National Historic Landmark by the National Park Service, it is known that Dena'ina people have been living in southwestern Alaska for at least the past 800 years.

If the survey continues, McMahan and his colleagues will be able to shed light on the length and extent of Dena'ina history on the Mulchatna River. That history will also certainly involve contact with their downstream Yup'ik neighbors and with prospectors in the late 19th century.

More information can be found on the National Park Service website [www.nps.gov/laci](http://www.nps.gov/laci).

**Figure 6:** Archeologist Dave McMahan writes notes in a Dena'ina house depression at "Russian Slough" in May 2001.



© National Park Service

## REFERENCES

**Balluta, Andrew.** 1980-2002.

Interviews and personal communications.

**Ellanna, Linda J. and Andrew Balluta.** 1992.

*Nuvendaltin Quht'ana: The People of Nondalton.*  
Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.

**O'Leary, Mathew.** 2001.

*Notes on the 2001 Upper Mulchatna River Survey.*  
Bureau of Indian Affairs, ANCSA Office.

**O'Leary, Mathew.** 2002.

*Notes on the 2002 Upper Mulchatna River Survey.*  
Bureau of Indian Affairs, ANCSA Office.